

Nixon's Next Option

Bombing the Dikes

by D. Gareth Porter

North Vietnamese society, based on agriculture and a highly motivated and resourceful labor force, has one major vulnerability—the vulnerability of its food supply to destruction by floods. The destruction of that food supply by flooding is Mr. Nixon's only remaining military option. He's bombing the ports, power transformers, rail lines and bridges; next he can bomb the dams and dikes of the Red River Delta.

The possibility arises because of the extreme unevenness of precipitation in the North; about 85 percent of its annual rainfall will come during the coming months, peaking in July, August and September in the most fertile rice-producing area. During the rainy season the Red River becomes swollen, often nearing the top of its dikes. If those dikes are breached or broken, floods will cause paddy fields to become waterlogged and the rice crop to be lost, even if other damage is minimized. And if the Red River overflows, it will probably mean serious floods in the other river valleys of Central North Vietnam as well.

North Vietnam's people have suffered floods during the rainy season—and droughts during the dry season—many times in their history, but the worst of all was in 1944 when 25 sections of the Red River dikes were broken and some 225,000 hectares of rice land, or about one-fourth of the total under cultivation, were ruined. That natural calamity became an atrocity when the Japanese occupation authority requisitioned much of the available paddy for its own purposes, leaving an estimated two million Vietnamese to starve to death.

Last year, flood waters smashed through a 30-mile section of the delta's dikes, wiping out large parts of the 1971 autumn rice crop, which was then being harvested and the 1972 winter crop, which is only now being harvested. Because of the importation of food from Russia and China and relief efforts, there apparently was no starvation. When systematic US bombing of the North began in 1965, a civilian army of 200,000 men and women was formed to patrol the branches of the Red River for any ruptures in the dikes, whose destruction would threaten mass starvation.

Air attacks on the dike system would have to be

combined with all-out bombing to prevent the import of sufficient foodstuffs overland from China. The Johnson administration gave serious consideration to just such a plan, based in part on the analysis of the Central Intelligence Agency, which said in January, 1967, "Bombing the levee system which keeps the Red River under control, if timed correctly, could cause large crop losses and force North Vietnam to import large amounts of rice. Depending on the success of the interdiction efforts, such imports might overload the transport system." But the military effects of such a policy, the CIA correctly observed, would be "limited and short-lived." Such proposals were rejected, and Secretary McNamara's memorandum of May 16, 1967 explained why: "There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and most of the world would not permit the United States to go," he wrote.

Although the systematic targeting of the Red River dikes and dams was ruled out, this did not mean that they were never hit. Attacks on dikes surrounding the city of Namdinh in 1966 were reported by New York Times correspondent Harrison Salisbury during his trip to the North. According to city officials, US planes dropped six bombs on a two-kilometer section of the dike on May 31 and again on July 14. As the water level of the Dao River continued to rise, American planes returned on July 20 and July 31 to hit the dikes repeatedly. The Pentagon responded to Salisbury's report by saying the real target was a transshipment facility in Namdinh, and that, in any case, "repairs would not be difficult and . . . accidental damage inflicted on it would not necessarily show up on later intelligence photography taken subsequent to repairs." Many such "accidents" occurred from 1965 through 1968, seemingly intended to force North Vietnam to divert manpower to repairing the damage. (In the case of Namdinh, the population worked for 20 straight days to repair the dike.)

Nevertheless, US bombing was not intended to cause major flooding in the Red River Delta. As we know from the Pentagon Papers, the joint chiefs were never satisfied with this restriction and pressed for both the removal of restraints on the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, "with the expected increase in civilian casualties to be accepted as militarily justified and necessary;" and the systematic targeting of dikes and dams as well.

D. GARETH PORTER is a PhD candidate in the Southeast Asia program at Cornell University and was Saigon bureau